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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA OFFICIAL DISCUSSES RELATIONS WITH
BELARUS AFTER THE ELECTIONS

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR KATHY ALLEGRONE FOR REASONS
1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) French MFA DAS-equivalent for Eurasian affairs Alexandre Vulic told us October 24 that, although the recent elections in Belarus did not meet any democratic standards, the EU intends to proceed with small steps to ease Belarus' isolation in response to other gestures Minsk has taken, most notably the release of prominent political prisoners. He reminded us that the EU had recently relaxed some visa restrictions on Belarus but emphasized that this only means the EU wants to talk to Minsk, not that Belarusian President "Lukashenko will be in Paris tomorrow." Vulic asserted that, despite this loosening of visa restrictions, France has not advocated for any change in the current sanctions on Belarus.

¶2. (C) Vulic noted that Paris, without being naive, wants to test Lukashenko's stated desire to reform Belarus and make it a more democratic country. He said that since Russia's military actions in Georgia last August there has been a greater push at the French MFA to engage more with Belarus to give Minsk other options besides Moscow (albeit with no expectation better ties to the EU would induce a break with Russia). France also wants to help Belarus weather the current financial crisis, which has already hit that country hard.

¶3. (C) Turning to the loan Belarus has requested from the IMF, Vulic stated that the EU's assent will be based on Belarus' "good behavior" to include Belarus not recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia; not installing a Russian weapons system, which Moscow has proposed as a counter to the installation of a U.S. missile defense system in Poland; more freedom for the media; election reform based on OSCE guidelines; more respect for civil liberties; and cessation of harassment of political opponents. Paris has also considered lowering visa fees for Belarusian citizens to travel to Europe, which would be helpful because it could give a lot of younger Belarusians exposure to an open, democratic society that could over time help trigger change in Belarus.

STAPLETON